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Article (Accepted Version)

Finlayson, James Gordon (2003) The theory of ideology and the ideology of theory: Habermas Contra Adorno. *Historical Materialism*, 11 (2). pp. 165-187. ISSN 1465-4466

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The Theory of Ideology or the Ideology of Theory: Habermas contra Adorno

1. Am I right in thinking that left-thinking academics are generally speaking more likely to defend Adorno's conception of critical theory than they are that of Jürgen Habermas. If I am, why is that?¹ One answer might be that Habermas has throughout his career flagrantly disregarded Oscar Wilde's advice that a man cannot be too careful in choosing his enemies. He has been as good at making enemies on the left as he has on the right. Over the years he has demonstrated a ruthlessly pragmatic willingness to cull sacred cows - such as the philosophy of history - in the interests of theoretical hygiene. Furthermore, he has never shirked from swimming against the intellectual tide, as is amply demonstrated by his defence in the 1980's of modernity as an unfinished project, and by his tireless championing of the unfashionable causes of rationalism and moral universalism. This may help explain why Marxists almost unanimously agree - an instance of consensus that is uncannily almost worthy of an ideal speech situation - that Habermas has sold out to analytic philosophy or to liberal political philosophy, or to some form of social democracy. In a recent issue of this journal, Deborah Cook joins the familiar chorus against Habermas's social theory.² Indeed Cook's robust defense of Adorno's theory of ideology and her related criticism of Habermas is a good example of the tendency I have described.³ I think that tendency is misplaced, and I want to take this opportunity to defend Habermas's convincing objections to Adorno's conception of critical theory. I argue that Habermas does not criticise Adorno's conception of ideology strongly enough. For Adorno's conception of ideology, which Cook attempts to defend, is conceptually and epistemologically incoherent. *A fortiori* it is of little theoretical or practical use to social theorists, who should look for better alternatives. Whilst Habermas's version of social-criticism is cumbersome and sometimes opaque, it is not incoherent. On the contrary it is self-consistent, it is methodologically more sound and historically more accurate than is Adorno's, and it provides a far more useful set of analytic tools to social critic.⁴

2. I want to look again at two questions raised by Cook: 1. is Adorno's conception of ideology tenable; 2. is Habermas's social theory ideological? Before I tackle the first question directly and offer my own argument against Adorno's concept of ideology, let me address the first question of whether Habermas's criticisms of Adorno are warranted. Cook claims that they are not, because Adorno 'never denied the rational potential in bourgeois culture'.⁵ Of course in one sense Adorno did not deny this. He and Horkheimer famously remark in the preface to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that 'social freedom is inseparable from enlightened thought', and they are certainly thinking, among other things, of the humanitarian ideals of liberty, equality and solidarity, i.e. of the 'liberal ideology' which Cook takes to be the basis of Adorno's ideology-critique.⁶ But this evidence is double-edged, as is Adorno and Horkheimer's whole conception of enlightenment rationality. For Adorno claims that the very enlightenment rationality which was supposed to liberate human beings from enthrallment to nature, has in fact enslaved them all the more and led to a reversion to barbarism. Moreover this reversion is not an accident of the implementation of the bourgeois ideals enshrined in enlightenment, for the notion of 'this very way of thinking (i.e., rational enlightened thought - GF)...already contains the seed of its reversal universally apparent today.'⁷ Cook's defence of Adorno trades on the ambiguity of the phrase 'rational potential' which means something very different for Adorno and Horkheimer than it does for Habermas. Adorno and Horkheimer, evidently believe that the rational potential of modern culture is also the seed of destruction – the danger as well as the saving power.⁸ Habermas does not believe this. He makes a categorial distinction between communicative and instrumental rationality. Using this distinction, he argues that while the expansion of systems of instrumental rationality that takes place under the process of modernisation *do have* socially deleterious effects, rationality and rationalisation - and here he differs from Adorno and Horkheimer - are not inherently pernicious. Habermas denies that the spread of communicative rationality has any depredatory social consequences. This denial is crucial. For whilst it might be true, as Cook claims, that Adorno acknowledges a rational potential in bourgeois culture in his peculiar double-edged sense of 'rational', this acknowledgement cannot save him from Habermas's the

objection that he does not acknowledge the existence of any rational potential which is not at the same time a potential for regression and destruction. Now it may appear churlish for Habermas to object that Adorno does not make the distinction between instrumental and communicative rationality that he does, but he is surely justified in claiming that, because of their too one-sided and pessimistic conception of enlightenment rationality, the anthropological cum historical narrative that Adorno and Horkheimer relate in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is too crude, too all-encompassing and too vitiated to provide a nuanced and accurate account of the process of modernisation.⁹

3. In her defence of Adorno, Cook simply ignores this difference in the use of the term of 'rational'. Adorno's conception of the rational potential of modern culture is double-edged; not so much dialectical as barbed. Yet on Cook's reading, 'Adorno insisted on the value of culture in the face of the lie of exchange'. For a variety of different reasons, only some of which I can go into here, this way of putting it is deeply misleading. Adorno thinks that the subsumptive relation of identity between general concepts and particular objects is of a kind with exchange relations.¹⁰ This is why he argues that the phenomenon of reification extends all the way to meaning and language (ND 21-22: HTS 101). The net effect is that identity-thinking is perfectly fitted to what Adorno calls the 'false' world. Indeed it is the seamlessness of the connection between identity-thinking and the world of exchange which makes the phenomenon of reification so hard to detect and so difficult to remove. Adorno pays identity-thinking the same kind of back-handed compliment that Lukács pays to Kant's Antinomies: on the one hand the Antinomies are ideological illusions; on the other hand they are 'necessary', not, as Kant thought, because they arise from the simultaneously transcendently ideal and empirically real structure of knowledge, but, because they correspond to the contradictory nature of bourgeois social reality.¹¹ Similarly Adorno claims that identity-thinking give rise to subsumptive judgments which are correspondence-true of, and functionally necessary to, the false world of exchange. At the same time, 'No unreflected banality can, as an imprint of a false life, still be true.' ND 45 A statement or judgment that aspires merely to be

correspondence-true to the facts of a false social world is itself untrue in a more emphatic sense.¹² But the dialectic runs deeper still. On the one hand the particularities or qualities of an object are bound up with its use-value. However these are suppressed under conditions of universal exchange because its exchange-value renders the object infinitely substitutable for other things of equivalent value. This represents a kind of violation of the qualitative particularity of the object. On the other hand the use of a thing is merely instrumental, whereas exchange at least implicitly contains within it the normative ideals of fairness and equality to which society fails to live up. The notion of exchange, then, contains various levels of both truth and falsity. Once this is appreciated Cook's interpretation, according to which Adorno contrasts the 'value of culture' with 'the lie of exchange' - as if the 'rational potential' to which Adorno appealed was present in the former and absent from the latter - can no longer be maintained. Adorno's dialectic is far more subtle and involuted than she allows.

4. A similar conclusion can be reached from the opposite direction, i.e. from a proper appreciation of Adorno's conception of the value of culture. Adorno's philosophical negativism implies that whatever value may reside in modern culture - or in those works of modern art within that culture which he deems successful - that value cannot be known directly and does not manifest itself positively. Without going into unnecessary details Adorno's negativism comprises the three following theses.
 - i. 'There is no way of living a false life correctly' (MM 39)¹³ Adorno means that in a false world there is no way of doing (and no way of knowing we are doing) the morally or politically right thing. Rational subjects cannot be sure that even apparently harmless or valuable activities are not contributing covertly and in spite of their intentions to the general state of alienation and unfreedom with which modern society is afflicted.
 - ii. The social world is *radically evil*.¹⁴ Briefly put, Adorno means by this that the social world consists exclusively of sedimented patterns of instrumental reason. The appearance that there are any ends that are worth pursuing for their own sake, is illusory. In fact all socially available ends, like the offerings of the culture industry,

are only instrumentally valuable as means to self-preservation through the manipulation and control of external nature. Furthermore, like Kant, Adorno thinks that instrumental reasons are heteronomous, they are forms of necessity or compulsion, rather than of autonomy or maturity. Hence all activities that the late-capitalist social world makes available to subjects are forms of institutionalized unfreedom.

- iii. We can have no positive conception of the good. Adorno frequently claims that the good (or what he calls variously 'reconciliation', 'redemption' 'happiness' and 'utopia') cannot be thought.¹⁵ He means not just that we cannot represent or picture the good, utopia etc. We cannot even conceive it without falsifying it, because to conceive is to identify.

As a matter of interest, Adorno seems to slide between two slightly different views - call them strong and weak negativity - depending on the context in which or the audience for whom he is writing. Strong negativity is the view that there is no good in the world, apart from the knowledge that there is no good in the world, assuming such knowledge is indeed good.¹⁶ Weak negativity is the view that there is some good in the world - for example the experience of pleasure granted by certain works of art, or spontaneous outpourings of human warmth and love - however only sufficient to make manifest their absence from the social totality. They are the exception, not the rule, of social reality; points of resistance to it, not its basis.¹⁷ Strong negativity is beset by the problem of how values or normative ideals which are absent from the social world can be made accessible to social theory. The only way Adorno can make these transcendent, but absent, values or ideals available to his social criticism is by reading the traces of their rational content in the surface of the present irrational - indeed radically evil - social totality. This is the solution which Adorno adopts in *Minima Moralia*, where he seeks the truth about life everywhere in its 'alienated form', and one which reappears in *Negative Dialectics*.¹⁸ However, this way of securing the availability of liberal ideals is just a prestidigitation which, in spite of appearances, contravenes the spirit of Adorno's negativism. In fact, as Michael Theunissen shows, Adorno's attempt to trace 'a real path of the positive in the negative' amounts to nothing but an inverted version of Hegel's optimistic

approach of reading the traces of rationality in the actual.¹⁹ The aptness of Theunissen's criticism becomes more apparent when we consider that Adorno's main criticism of Hegel concerns the doctrine of determinate negation, the view that the negation of a negative yields a positive (ND 164: MCP 144). But Adorno's strongly negativistic solution to the problem of the accessibility of the (absent) good trades on determinate negation. Therefore Theunissen is right to criticise strong negativism for being 'prenegativistic' and 'not negative enough'.²⁰

The trouble with weak negativism is that it too is not negative enough to avoid being flatly inconsistent with Adorno's claims in *Negative Dialectics*, and however dialectical Adorno is, however scathing about analytic philosophy, he never goes so far as rejecting rational argument and welcoming inconsistency (ND 39ff). Moreover weak negativism faces a different version of the problem of accessibility, for it presupposes that Adorno has unimpeachable criteria for recognising these fragments or splinters of potentially emancipatory rationality in the untrue whole. But what allows Adorno to exempt these criteria of recognition from the suspicion of ideology which supposedly casts its gray shadow over all other thought? Unless he grants critical theory an epistemic privilege, and thereby makes exactly the same error for which he condemns Lukács, Adorno leaves the social theorist panning the dark waters of the social world with no reliable way of knowing when he has found he nuggets of goodness he is after.

Due consideration, then, of Adorno's philosophical negativism - which is central and essential to his philosophical project - further undermines the view propounded by Cook that Adorno's immanent criticism of ideology contrasts the 'rational potential' or 'value' of culture with 'the lie of exchange'.

5. The considerations in 2. and 3. do not directly support Habermas's criticism that Adorno's social theory fails to do justice to rational potential of modern culture, but they do nullify Cook's attempts to rebut the criticism. Now I shall give a more direct answer to the question concerning the tenability of Adorno's conception of ideology. The Adornian conception of ideology that Cook undertakes to defend is, roughly, the view that 'ideology lies...in the implicit identity of concept and thing, which the

world justifies even when the dependence of consciousness on being is summarily taught.' (ND 50) To see what is wrong with this view we have to consider that, for Adorno, to think in concepts is to identify. It does not matter here what Adorno considers to be wrong with identity-thinking. All that matters is that it follows from this conception of ideology that one cannot so much have a concept of an object that is not at the same time an ideology. Only insights that are not identical to their objects, which are non-conceptual and hence ineffable, are therefore also non-ideological. The first obvious point to make is that very few insights fall under this description. One is tempted to say, 'under this category' i.e. the category of the non-identical; and what is nice about this temptation is that it underlines that we need words, concepts and thoughts even to indicate what we mean by the ineffable or the non-identical, namely a content that cannot be expressed in words and cannot be thought conceptually. According to Adorno only aesthetic experiences that are in principle not recuperable by concepts do fall under the description of the non-identical or ineffable. The second obvious point to make is that it is impossible to say (and hence also impossible to know) what such ineffable experiences are experiences of. If we could, they would not be ineffable. Nonetheless, to cut a long treatise on negative dialectics very short, Adorno thinks we must go ahead anyway and try, whilst remaining conscious of the necessary failure of this attempt. This is why Adorno frequently claims that the task of philosophy is to 'say the unsayable' or to think the ineffable (ND 21).²¹

One problem that arises is that, if the domain of non-ideology is so narrow, then the corresponding domain of ideology is very wide; too wide. It makes for a very interesting conception of non-identity (and non-ideology), but a very uninteresting conception of ideology. Every conceptual belief or judgment about something, everything that can be said, is ideological. We can make sense of this very wide conception of ideology, if we take it to amount to the uncontroversial claim that conceptual judgments depend somehow on non-conceptual experience but fail, by virtue of being mediated by concepts, to do justice to the particularity or immediacy of such experience. On this view, every thought or judgment - as a kind of general statement or classification - fails to do justice to every particular it classifies or

generalises about. The trouble with this view, is that it trivialises the claim that a belief or theory is ideology. Nobody would dispute that any thought, judgment, item of knowledge or whatever is ideological in this trivial sense.

6. Now consider what happens if we try to rectify things by making Adorno's conception of ideology more interesting, by using the term in its familiar non-trivial, pejorative Marxian sense. Adorno frequently uses the term in this more familiar, Marxian sense. For example, he claims in *Aesthetic Theory* that ideology is 'socially necessary illusion'.²² Ideologies, on this view, are beliefs or theories which are false but nevertheless widespread and persistent. However, unlike non-ideological beliefs and theories, ideologies do not persist and are not widely held because they are true, but because they function to maintain or reinforce certain institutional structures of power and domination. Moreover, because of their usefulness to these institutions, the falsity of ideological illusions does not show itself in the usual ways in which the falsity of non-ideological beliefs shows itself. For, other things being equal, false beliefs eventually come to light and are overturned, because they eventually lead to unsuccessful actions, hit upon convincing counter-evidence or meet with rational disagreement. However, if Adorno is using the non-trivial, pejorative conception of ideology, he is in even bigger trouble. For the claims 1. that a particular judgment, belief or set of beliefs is ideological, and 2. that we can know that it is, only make sense, if it is possible for there to be non-ideological beliefs or judgments, and for us to know that there are. However, by Adorno's own lights, only non-conceptual, ineffable experiences or insights are not ideological. *Ex hypothesi* we cannot say, and hence we cannot know, what such experiences are or what it is that they are experiences of. In other words they cannot be beliefs or judgments or thoughts in any recognisable sense. But that seems to imply first, that there cannot be any non-ideological beliefs, judgement, or thoughts, and second, that we cannot know what it is for a belief, judgement or thought not to be ideological, in which case we cannot know what it is for something to be ideological either. Hence the claim that *all conceptual judgments* are ideological threatens to become incoherent.²³ So Adorno is

caught on a dilemma entirely of his own making. Either his conception of ideology qua identity is trivial, or it is simply incoherent.

7. Cook rightly points out that in *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* 'Habermas never directly challenges Adorno's conception of ideology as identity-thinking'.²⁴ If that were right, it would not be decisive. Silence is ambiguous. We cannot take silence as evidence that Habermas endorses Adorno's substantive, pejorative conception of ideology qua identity. Anyway Habermas is not really silent, for he does claim that Adorno's conception of ideology-criticism is 'totalizing' (PDM 116). Adorno's social criticism is totalizing, he argues, because it claims that all rational thought is an expression of power and domination over nature. But this must apply to Adorno's social criticism too: insofar as it is rational, it is also just an expression of power and domination. Hence Adorno's ideology-critique must, if it is consistent, criticize itself for being ideological (PDM 116). At the same time, insofar as Adorno and Horkheimer want their theory to be believed, insofar as their theory makes a validity-claim to truth, they must implicitly hold it to be more than a mere expression of power or domination. They must believe it to be, and claim that it is, true or correct. Otherwise, why should anyone be disposed to believe them? In this case, the unavoidable pragmatic implication that there is reason to believe what they say (is true), is in conflict with what the theory states. Hence, concludes Habermas, the theory, qua totalized critique, is guilty of a performative contradiction (PDM 119). And a performative contradiction is a form of incoherence. So, if Habermas stops short of saying in so many words that Adorno's very conception of ideology as identity-thinking is either trivial or incoherent, this is, firstly, because Habermas is specifically objecting to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in which Adorno's notion of identity-thinking is not yet fully developed. It is, secondly, because Habermas is untypically - perhaps out of his deep respect for his former colleague and mentor - always restrained in his explicit criticisms of Adorno. It is definitely not because Habermas thinks there is anything to be said in favour of the conception of ideology as identity-thinking.²⁵

8. Of course, one does not have to go so far as Adorno and see conceptual thought itself as the origin of ideology. One might think, like Marx did, that the origin of ideological illusion lies in the commodity form, or in some other socio-economic mechanism of belief-formation. But that does not really help, because the theory of ideology itself faces serious objections, regardless of what it takes the illusion-forming mechanism to be. This is why Habermas is right to stop thinking of his own social criticism as a kind criticism of ideology. What are these serious objections? Firstly, why is it that ideological false beliefs persist and fail to be overturned, when the falsity of other beliefs tends to manifest itself to agents through their unsuccessful practical interventions in the world or through the epistemic disappointments of belief holders? What is it that prevents the falsity of ideological beliefs from coming to light as a matter of course? The theory of ideology offers no answer to this question. Secondly, supposing a plausible answer to the first question can be given, it will have to allow the theory of ideology itself not to be subject to the putative illusion forming mechanism. For, ideology-critique, if it is not to be self-undermining, cannot itself be just another ideology. Hence it is not enough for the social theorist qua ideology-critic to show that there is a socio-economic mechanism which produces false beliefs that somehow function to legitimate certain power relations. The ideology-critic has into the bargain to identify (or at least to be able assume that there exists) another mechanism which reliably produces true, non-ideological beliefs, among which she can count her own theory. She must be able to justifiably exempt her own theory from suspicion that it is itself an ideology. Cook assumes that she and her readers are more 'ideology-proof' than Habermas, but offers no justification for this assumption.²⁶ If ideology really runs as deep as she and Adorno maintain, how can her own theory be miraculously untouched by ideological distortion? And if it is not, why should her theory be believed? Thirdly, on this view, ideologies are supposed not to promote the real interests of agents but, on the contrary, directly or indirectly to thwart them. This makes it even more improbable that the 'victims' of ideological beliefs still cling to them. As Wilhelm Reich famously puts it: 'what has to be explained is not the fact that the man who is hungry steals or the man who is exploited strikes, but why the majority of those who are hungry *don't* steal and why the majority of those who are

exploited *don't* strike.'²⁷ The ideology theorist just does not have a plausible answer to Reich's question. Why posit the intrusion of systematic forms of irrational illusion and mass-deception rather than, say, the simple rational fear that each person has of being caught and punished for stealing, or of being sacked for striking? These objections are extremely damaging to the theory of ideology. So Habermas has very sound theoretical reasons for abandoning the theory and coming up with a less extravagant answer to Reich's question and a better explanation for the successful self-maintenance of modern, late-capitalist society than the theory of ideology offers.

9. Towards the end of her article Cook challenges what she takes to be Habermas's 'end of ideology' thesis. Habermas offers an historical account of why ideology-criticism is an outmoded form of social theory. He takes the paradigm of an ideology to be dogmatic religious faith, which functions as a compensation mechanism for a meaningless and alienated mundane life. He contends that fully rationalised, modern societies are not fertile ground for such ideologies. To understand why he thinks this we have to take a look at his theory of modernity. According to Habermas the process of modernisation is marked by the separation of value spheres, which accompanies the process of rationalisation. The modernity that results from this process presents an ambiguous legacy for modern individuals. On the one hand, their sphere of freedom is greatly increased. The power of the state, once uncoupled from religion and tradition, is held in check by publicly accessible criteria of legitimation (validity-claims): e.g. whether or not the state can satisfy the interests of all its constituent subjects. However, these increases in subjective freedom and in the accountability of suprasubjective structures of authority are bought at a high price: the social deracination of individual subjects and their increasing vulnerability to the disciplinary effects impersonal systems of administration and to the vicissitudes of an ever more powerful capitalist economy. His analysis of rationalization synthesizes elements of a panoply of different theories by Hegel, Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Parsons, the Frankfurt School, Offe and Luhmann. Very briefly put, Habermas analyses modernity and modernization in terms of the relation between the autonomous systems of money and power - as the embodiments of 'instrumental

rationality' - and the life-world - as the embodiment of 'communicative rationality'. This change in emphasis enables him to correct what he sees as a blind spot in the one-sided and too pessimistic analysis of modernity that runs from Weber through to Horkheimer and Adorno. For Habermas, rationalization has both negative and positive consequences. On the negative side, *social pathologies* result when systems of 'instrumental action' colonize the repository of 'communicative action' in the life-world, which is the basis of cultural reproduction, socialization and social integration, and thus sever at the root the opportunities that modernity presents (TKH2 449-548/TCA2 303-374). On the positive side, as we have seen, modernity presents an opportunity for modern subjects to establish the legitimacy of institutions, customs and practices on the basis of validity-claims, a basis that promises stability, transparency and accountability.²⁸ For in modern societies discourse functions as a way of replenishing the repository of shared meanings that constitute the lifeworld, by restoring, repairing or replacing problematised understandings, and in this manner discourse is able partly to compensate for the demise of religious traditions as a common source of meaning, value, and belief (PNK, 226).

Now, one consequence of Habermas's view that the chief belief-forming mechanisms of rationalized modern societies are linguistic, discursive practices is that systematic illusions in the form of religious ideologies tend to become destabilized by rational reflection. Cook objects to this conception of modernity on the grounds that it implies 'that we have gained a degree of intellectual maturity that cannot be revoked.'²⁹ This is roughly right, although it gives Habermas's theory an individualistic and intellectualist bias which he would certainly want to resist. For Habermas it is a matter of the cognitive complexity of the social systems within which 'we' are socialized – i.e. of the degree to which validity (actual and possible rational discourse) provides the basis of social order.³⁰ His view certainly *does not imply* that people's beliefs and desires *cannot* be manipulated by advertising. It implies only that the influence of such mechanisms of manipulation is in principle discoverable by the agents at whom it is aimed, that the falsity of the beliefs which they produce is not systematically prevented from coming to light by their social function, as is putatively the case with ideologies. Further, Habermas never denies

that modern subjects feel disempowered and helpless before the anonymous and impersonal forces of the administrative and economic systems, and that the individual agents who inhabit the lifeworld are largely ignorant of the myriad ways in which present society depends on their collective cognitive and practical activity. It is just that social theory does not need to posit the influence of ideology – systematic mass-deception and collective false-consciousness – to explain these things.³¹ To claim, as Cook does, that the process of colonization is itself reinforced ideologically through the medium of advertising, is to miss the methodological point of introducing the theory of colonization in the first place. The pathologies of modern capitalist societies are more mundane and far less mysterious than the theory of ideology makes them appear to be.

10. Whether the great days of ideologies have really passed with the advent of modernity, as Habermas claims, and whether therefore the conception of social theory as ideology-critique has outlived its usefulness, is a question which has to be answered by critically examining his analysis of modernity, by comparing it with the alternatives and checking it against all the available evidence. It won't do to adduce Terry Eagleton's anecdotal evidence that many people still go to church, argue about politics and care about education and social services. Such platitudinous observations are neither here nor there; they are certainly not counterexamples to Habermas's theory. He can happily accept them all.³² What Cook must provide instead is an argument to show that Habermas's whole 'notion of reason' is, as she puts it, 'ideologically suspect'. I take this to mean that his social theory underestimates the need for radical change, that it shows too much faith in the 'rational potential' of existing liberal democratic states, and that it justifies, instead of criticizing, existing institutions of law, democracy and morality. The passage of *Between Facts and Norms* which Cook adduces to back up her claim runs as follows:

...[C]ontext-transcending validity claims...are not themselves transported into the beyond of an ideal realm of noumenal beings. In contrast to the projection of ideals in the light of which we can identify *deviations* "the idealising presuppositions we always already have to adopt whenever we want to reach

mutual understanding do not involve any kind of correspondence or comparison between idea and reality.” (BFN 323)

In Cook's eyes this passage demonstrates that 'the critical leverage once offered by the concept of communicative reason (which was already much less critical than many radicals would have liked)' has disappeared entirely.³³ The question, though, is not what radicals of whatever stripe would have liked. The question is, on the basis of what normative criteria is social theory *entitled* to criticize existing institutions, and what is the scope of those criticisms? In the passage Cook cites Habermas is making the familiar point that there just is no transcendent, Platonic idea of the good ready to hand for the social theorist to use. Nor is there any thick conception of goodness or rightness, any comprehensive metaphysical doctrine, on which everyone can agree. There are, however, 'thin' context-transcending validity claims to truth and moral rightness respectively, but these are pragmatic presuppositions of existing communicative practice, i.e. of the non-strategic use of speech oriented towards reaching understanding. Cook bizarrely concludes from this that '[s]ince no salient distinction can now be made between the ideal dimension of reason and existing discursive practices, it becomes difficult to understand how communicative reason can continue to serve even as the normative basis for social criticism.'³⁴ Cook repeats her claim, 'there is no opposition between the ideal and the real because "particles and fragments of an existing reason [are] already incorporated in political practices, however distorted these may be." ...Sociologists are to confirm what the philosopher Habermas apparently already knows: the real is rational. Indeed, as Marcuse observed with respect to Hegel's equally affirmative *Philosophy of Right*: at this point, critical philosophy cancels itself out.'³⁵ Again, further on, Cook repeats the complaint that 'Habermas uncritically and affirmatively predicates rationality of the real.'³⁶

Recall that Habermas's point is simply that the universal and context-transcendent standards of criticism to which his social theory appeals are immanent to practices of communication. If he is right, then these standards do allow us to criticize the social world, to say how it ought to be and ought not to be. For example, they make it possible for us to judge whether these institutions are morally acceptable, by seeing whether or not they are based on principles which every affected person has reason to

accept. This is exactly what Hegel, in the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right*, warns his readers *against doing*, and what he says philosophy anyway comes to late to do, namely to make normative judgments about how the world ought to be. So it is quite inappropriate to equate Habermas and Hegel in this respect.³⁷ Cook would be on much safer ground if she offered arguments against Habermas's rational reconstruction of speech oriented towards understanding and challenged his conception of communicative rationality, but she does not do that. Instead she accuses Habermas of peddling the positivist ideology that normative ideals are immanent to the communicative use of language, that discourse and communicative action are the essential structuring principles of social interaction, and that they have to some extent been embodied in the democratic institutions of Western liberal democracies.

Cook's conclusion is perplexing. She rejects Habermas's claim that there are normative standards of criticism immanent to existing communicative practices, not because she challenges his formal pragmatic theory of communication, but because she thinks that critical theory has to be based on transcendent, ideal, normative standards. I take it that she endorses the strong version of Adorno's negativism outlined above according to which there is no goodness or rightness in the world and thus no immanent basis for normative social criticism. The conclusion she draws, however, recalls Marcuse's qualified rehabilitation of transcendent critical theory, rather than Adorno's in principle (if not always in practice) resolutely immanent and negative approach.³⁸ In other words Cook's criticisms of Habermas presuppose a conception of critical theory that is normatively much richer, and metaphysically much more dubious, than the paradoxical Adornian version of social criticism she wants to defend.

11. What I have written here does not amount to a full defense of Habermas's social theory. I have been largely content to report what he says, and to undermine the Adornian alternative that Cook - and not only she, finds more persuasive. My main point has been that Habermas is right to reject Adorno's conception of ideology and that he has sound reasons for abandoning the whole conception of social theory as ideology-criticism. To defend Adorno's incoherent conception of ideology, as Cook

does, is, at very least, an unpromising way to attack Habermas. In order to show what is wrong with Habermas's social theory, one has to engage critically with the formidable detail of his rational reconstruction of communicative rationality and theory of modernity. There is one final point I wish to make. Cook argues that Habermas might be offering a 'liberal ideological legitimation of politics in the West', merely by virtue of his insistence that a rational potential for social criticism and emancipation is contained in the communicative practices which are woven into the institutional fabric of modern societies. But, on her view, Adorno himself acknowledges that there is a rational potential in modern culture, namely 'liberal ideology'. Let's assume, as Cook herself does, that this 'liberal ideology' is not barbed, but is what Marcuse would call the *a priori* of true social criticism because, say, it is the anticipation of a social system which would satisfy everyone's legitimate expectation of living a worthwhile human life. Now what is the difference between this view of Adorno, which Cook wants to defend, and the view of Habermas which she condemns as 'ideologically suspect'? Hardly anything, I suspect. It is true that Habermas's conception critical social theory appears less ambitious and emphatic than Adorno's more aporetic version, which still aims, albeit obliquely, at redemption. For Habermas the practical aims of social theory are much less utopian; and they are more diagnostic than they are remedial. This does not mean that Habermas's social theory has no practical implications. All knowledge has its uses. It simply means that, given what it is - a theory of society - its main achievement, if true, will be to help us better understand the social world, which is necessary anyway if social change - either piecemeal improvement or radical transformation - is to be achieved. Just because Habermas's social theory, unlike Adorno's, does not aim obliquely and forlornly at redemption does not make it a form of ideology; at least not in any substantive objectionable sense. It may be ideological in the trivial sense outlined above, but that is not objectionable. The real difference is that Adorno's theory, as Benjamin once wrote, gives us hope, 'but only for the sake of the hopeless'.³⁹ Habermas's social theory, by contrast, gives us reason to hope that whilst human beings can speak, while they can say what is wrong with the world and what a better world would be like, then a better world is still possible. This may not be much,

it may not be even be anything like enough, but it is, as Primo Levi knew, still something.

Except for cases of pathological incapacity, one can and must communicate; it is a useful and easy way to contribute to the peace of others and one's own. Because silence, the absence of signals, is in its turn a signal, but it is ambiguous, and ambiguity generates anxiety and suspicion. To say that it is impossible to communicate is false; one always can. To refuse to communicate is a failing; we are biologically predisposed to communication, and in particular to its highly evolved and noble form, which is language.⁴⁰

¹ There is an interesting question here about the general reverence with which the intellectual academic left now treats Adorno's work. Why Adorno, of all people, who held the view that almost any revolutionary political practice was adventitious and misguided? Why is so little attention now paid, say, to the more praxis-oriented philosophies of Marcuse or Sartre?

² Cook 2000: 84.

³ Cook 2000: 68-87.

⁴ Obviously I do not deny that Adorno wrote provocative, interesting, insightful and beautifully-crafted works, which repay detailed attention and have much to offer philosophers and social theorists. Further, I believe that theories are tools that can be put to a variety of different uses, among which are the aims of understanding society and achieving social change. Unlike Adorno, I think that the instrumental value or utility of social theory is harmless.

⁵ Cook 2000: 67 & 70.

⁶ Adorno 1969: 3, Cook 2000: 68.

⁷ Adorno 1969: 3.

⁸ This is a quotation from Hölderlin's wonderful Ode Patmos, which Adorno quotes in order to capture the precarious dialectical situation of Odysseus, and by extension, of bourgeois subjectivity. "Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst das Rettende auch" [Where there is danger, the saving power increases also.] Adorno 1969: 45.

⁹ See below §10. It is a little unfair of Cook to claim that Habermas polemic is self-aggrandising, since he 'effectively turns himself into the sole modern standard bearer of reason, culture and enlightenment. Cook 2000: 67. Of course Habermas believes – and who does not – that his own theory is correct, and that Adorno's is wrong. He also believes that he is adopting an unfashionable position, which in championing a form of rationalism in 1985, when postmodernism was in its ascendance, he certainly was. This might explain the polemical and slightly beleaguered tone of *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*.

¹⁰ Roughly he thinks that identity is the genus to the species of exchange. E.g. ND 34.

¹¹ Lukács gives Kant's transcendental dialectic a materialist reading. For Kant a dialectic is name given generally to a logic of illusion. A transcendental dialectic is an apparent contradiction which 'unavoidably' and 'naturally' arises because of the distinction between the transcendental ideal and the empirically real world. Kant 1956: (A 61-4 & 293-303). Lukács preserves something of Kant's understanding of the Antinomies as necessary (albeit illusory) contradictions, but attributes to them quite a different kind of necessity – he sees them as functionally necessary to the bourgeois economic order – and understands them to have a socio-historical rather than a metaphysical origin. Lukács 1990: 134 & 149.

¹² Adorno's emphatic sense of truth is both Platonist and Hegelian. Adorno is a Platonist insofar as he conceives truth as an aspect of the good, or rather the converse, untruth as an aspect of the bad. He is Hegelian insofar as his conception of untruth, as Michael Theunissen points out 'aims at bad actuality'.

Theunissen 1983: 42. To say that the whole is false or untrue, as Adorno does (MM 50) is to claim that falsity, i.e. radical evil (see n. 15 below) is instantiated in the social world.

¹³ ['Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im Falschen' GS4 43. Literally translated this means: 'There is no correct living in the False' where 'the False' is a deliberate inversion of 'the True' in Hegel's famous dictum from the Preface to the *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 'Das Wahre ist das Ganze.' Hegel 1986: 24. As always, though, the most literal translation would be ugly and unhelpful.

¹⁴ Throughout his writings Adorno never blushes at using terms like 'absolute evil' DA 171, HTS 62, 'radically evil' ND 374 & 23 MCP 114-5 and 'the bad' [*das Schlechte*] ND 128. He thinks that social fabric of the post-war world, specifically of America, of Western Europe and of the whole Eastern Bloc including the Soviet Union, is essentially corrupt or diseased [*Unheil*] DA 5, ND 128.

¹⁵ The materialist longing to conceive the thing, wants the opposite: the complete object is to be thought only in the absence of images. Such an absence converges with the theological ban on graven images. Materialism secularises it, by not permitting utopia to be pictured positively; that is the content of its negativity. ND 207

¹⁶ Presumably Adorno does think that such knowledge is good, hence the epigraph to Part Two of *Minima Moralia*: 'Where everything is bad it must be good to know the worst.' F.H. Bradley (MM 83)

²² Hauke Brunkhorst makes the mistake of not taking Adorno's claim that the world is radically evil at face value. For example he interprets the dictum that there is no right way to live a false life to mean "only that there is no entirely true life in a false life", in other words, that under present circumstances there is no entirely good way to live a life. That strikes me as much too tame. In the next paragraph Brunkhorst's interpretation of Adorno shifts significantly. He attributes to Adorno the claim that "true life", is not possible "in the case of a completely false life", but that a human life that is at least not misspent is nonetheless imaginable. This is consistent with the stronger view I have outlined. Finally, two lines later, Brunkhorst attributes a third position to Adorno, namely the view that "the damaged life is not yet the completely false life." This is now more like the weaker view outlined here. Brunkhorst 1999: 64.

¹⁸ MM 15 Michael Theunissen criticizes this trope of Adorno's, which is captured in the following metaphor in *Negative Dialectics*: 'consciousness could not despair over the gray, if it did not harbor the concept of a different colour whose scattered traces are not absent from the negative whole.' ND 370 Theunissen 1983: 57

¹⁹ Ironically Adorno is guilty of exactly the same Hegelian mistake, for which Cook criticises Habermas. Not quite, because Cook thinks that Habermas is guilty of Hegel's mistake of deeming that rational to be real. She is criticising the conservative or positivist view he supposedly holds. Theunissen is objecting to the implicit Hegelianism in Adorno's method of reading the rational in an (albeit absent) real – a kind of negative theodicy. Cook 2000: 81.

²⁰ Theunissen 1983: 58.

²¹ See also HTS 102. 'If philosophy can be defined at all, it is an effort to express things one cannot speak about, to help express the non-identical despite the fact that expressing it identifies it at the same time.'

²² Ideology, as socially necessary illusion, [*Schein*] is, in that necessity, always the disfigured image of the true.' AT 345

²³ Recall that Adorno's claim is not that, as a matter of fact, all present beliefs and judgments are ideological, but under different circumstances there *could be* non-ideological beliefs or judgments. It is not an error theory. Adorno's position implies that there could not so much be a genuine belief, judgment or thought, which is not, by virtue of being an application of a concept, also an ideological illusion. For he locates ideology *qua* identity in the very relation of concept to object, which is essential to thought. To move beyond ideology *qua* identity, is therefore to move beyond concepts to some ineffable non-conceptual relation to things. 'The utopia of knowledge would be to open up the non-conceptual with concepts, without making it identical to them.' ND 21 The basic thought here is not dissimilar to some Neo-Platonist picture of absolute knowledge. Adorno's thought is slightly more paradoxical than the Neo-Platonist view that conceptual judgments are to be superseded in virtue of some supraconceptual access to absolute reality, since that relation has, for Adorno, itself to be wrested from within conceptual thought.

²⁴ Cook 2000: 78.

²⁵ One of the harshest, albeit still implicit, criticisms Habermas makes, is to group Adorno together with Heidegger and Derrida (and Wittgenstein and Jaspers) as one of the thinkers who took, as a final way of avoiding metaphysical thinking, 'a turn to the irrational'. PMT 37

²⁶ Cook 2000: 85.

²⁷ Reich 1997: 19. Mike Rosen makes this question central to his very helpful study of ideology and false consciousness in Rosen: 1996.

²⁸ This, I take it, is the crucial positive implication of Habermas's *Modernity Thesis*. It is because Habermas sees the advent of modernity as an opportunity for achieving social stability and legitimacy, whilst widening the scope for individual autonomy, that since his 1980 Adorno Prize lecture - *Modernity - an Unfinished Project* - he has resisted the trend of some postmodernist writers to say good-bye and good-riddance to the project of modernity and its opportunities.

²⁹ Cook 2000: 77.

³⁰ Habermas has a long and complex story about who 'we' are. Suffice it to say that we are communicative agents, who have been socialised into post-conventional forms of life - here specifically citizens of modern Western liberal democratic societies.

³¹ Sheer social complexity rather than ideological deception may explain people's ignorance of the metabolic relation between social order and the beliefs and acts of agents.

³² Cook 2000: 79.

³³ Cook 2000: 81.

³⁴ Cook 2000: 81.

³⁵ Cook 2000: 81.

³⁶ Cook 2000: 85.

³⁷ As a matter of fact this criticism is based on a misunderstanding of the *Doppelsatz* found in the 1820 version of Hegel's Lectures on the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*: 'What is rational is actual; and what is actual is rational'. The meaning of this notorious sentence is too complicated to go into here. Suffice it to say that it does not mean either that everything is just fine as it is, or that the present political order is rational. That said, Cook is in good company. Old and Young Hegelians alike, from Feuerbach's teacher, Paulus, through to Marx, all the way to anti-Hegelians such as Kierkegaard and more recently Popper, have all mistakenly understood this sentence to contain Hegel's conservative and affirmative endorsement of the *status quo*. Interestingly Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse are equally guilty of the same misinterpretation. See Hegel 1991: 389.

³⁸ Marcuse claims that the 'judgement that human life is worth living' is 'the *a priori* of social theory', and assumes that we know what it is to lead a worthwhile life. Marcuse 1991: xlii.

³⁹ These words, which if I remember rightly are from Benjamin's essay on Goethe's *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, appear at the end of Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man*. Marcuse 1991: 257.

⁴⁰ Levi 1989: 69.

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Abbreviations

AT Adorno, Theodor *Aesthetic Theory*, tr. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone Press, 1997).

ÄT Adorno, Theodor 1990, *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp).

CM Adorno, Theodor 1998, *Critical Models* tr. Henry Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press).

DA Adorno, Theodor W. & Horkheimer, Max 1969, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Frankfurt a/M: S. Fischer Verlag GmbH.).

GS4 Adorno, Theodor W. 1970, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 4, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp) 1997.

A revised version of this article was published as 'Theory of Ideology and the Ideology of Theory: Habermas contra Adorno' in ***Historical Materialism***, 2003, 11.2, 169-187.
